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It is a pleasure to participate in your 24th annual Congress. Yours is an organization of great distinction and unparalleled achievements. It is truly a national organization representing every level of our society -- local, State and Federal.

Secretary Bergland deeply regrets that he could not be with you but he has, as you know, been in the Far East the past three weeks engaged in a series of trade conferences and just yesterday he opened the third annual meeting of the World Food Council in Manila.

It has been twenty-five years since the enactment of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act. By the usual measure of man's life span, the watershed program has reached maturity.

Maturity has its distinct advantages -- but it also carries with it a whole new set of responsibilities. There have been many changes in the original act. New authorities have been added. New environmental and economic concerns have emerged. Serious questions regarding the Federal government's commitment to the program in the future have been raised.

It is a measure of your maturity that you are willing -- at this Congress -- to address these new responsibilities and challenges.

My remarks are going to parallel the Report of the Special Study Committee which has been under consideration by this Congress.

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Remarks by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research & Education, at the 24th Annual National Watershed Congress, Washington, D. C., June 21, 1977.

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I was impressed by the Report -- impressed by its scope -- impressed by the evident expertise of the members of that committee.

I was particularly interested in the "overview" recommendation that this nation develop a "water policy for America."

I agree with you that such a policy is long over-due. It is time that we intelligently consider the varied and complex facets of too much water, not enough water, the depletion of water reserves and the ugly problem of water pollution.

It is fitting that the National Watershed Congress is willing and eminently qualified to participate in the creation of such a policy.

In the interest of time, I would prefer to confine my remarks to four of the eight categories of recommendations made by the Special Study Committee -- covering these areas:

- Program orientation
- Public participation
- Watershed planning and evaluation, and
- Land treatment.

I will also attempt to summarize the current Federal funding policies.

#### Program Orientation

There has been considerable discussion about what the thrust of the watershed program should be.



In the beginning the major focus of the program was watershed protection, flood protection and agricultural water management. Later new objectives were added -- fish and wildlife enhancement, recreation, and municipal water supply -- to make it a truly multi-purpose program.

The Water Resources Council's principles and standards provide the basic concepts for water and related land resource planning. They are based on the premise that economic and environmental objectives are equal in value and should be considered equally in the decision-making.

I fully endorse this approach. Simply translated, it means that fish and wildlife values be given equal weight with food and fiber production as we develop watershed plans. But I am not convinced that planners have sufficiently guided sponsors to give these objectives equal consideration.

Another area of concern to me is the controversy that has existed over "channelization." This controversy has given the small watershed program a black eye in many areas. I will work diligently to adjust the watershed program to erase the "black hat" image. This will require cooperation and support from each of you, but more importantly it will require compromise by all of us on some issues.

All of you are, no doubt, well aware that President Carter asked all Federal agencies to review all water resource projects. Environmental, safety, and economic aspects are to be examined. Initially, the effort focused on large water projects assisted by the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, but later was expanded to include the small watershed program. That review has been under way since April and is expected to be completed soon.



The review has been done by an interdisciplinary team made up of key personnel from several agencies besides the USDA's Soil Conservation Service. Because of the massive number of projects being reviewed (over 700) an initial screening of projects was done by SCS state conservationists using criteria provided by the review team. Remaining projects are being given a more detailed review, based on a summary paper for each project, supplemented with more data where needed.

The team is preparing summaries of those watershed projects that meet the environmental, economic, and safety tests provided by the President's office and of those projects that need to be examined more closely to be sure we have no serious problems in these same regards. We foresee that segments of some projects should be dropped, modified, or otherwise changed to insure that we are meeting that part of NEPA that mandates the best use of our environmental resources.

The review team has, by the very nature of its makeup and its intensive indepth study, had an unusual opportunity to examine potential new policy direction to make the watershed program serve Americans better.

For example, the team found that more times than not, environmental problems are cropping up on older projects. The longer a project lags between authorization and construction, the more it gets caught in changing economic, environmental, and social priorities. The lesson is simple. Get projects through planning and construction on a timely basis. We are already considering ways to deauthorize a project if it has gone a reasonable number of years without action. Otherwise, we're trying to solve yesterday's problems against today's value systems. The Special Study Committee included specific recommendations along this line.



In another area, the review team found that most of the real environmental problems concerned types 3-20 wetlands and the alteration of natural perennial stream channels. We will review our present policies to insure that these resource entities are only altered when there are no other choices and the benefits are of overriding importance to society.

A new set of stream channel guidelines is being jointly developed by SCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These guidelines will be given wide distribution and opportunity for review and comment. They will help reduce misunderstanding in terminology but, more importantly, they will provide the basic agreement on how we will carry out this Department's future activities in this area. The present draft of the guidelines allows for channel modification only in those streams where it can be accomplished with little direct adverse effect on "important fish and wildlife habitat values." Implementation of this goal will require close coordination with the Fish and Wildlife Service, sponsors, State agencies, and many special interest groups.

I know this activity may be time-consuming, but I feel it is extremely important to insure the future of a viable watershed program. Further, the guidelines provide for early and continuous participation by all publics in the planning process. It is imperative that all views are known "up front" where decisions are being made. Too often, we have "reacted" adversely to plans already conceived and difficult to alter.

I have been concerned for many years with the altering of perennial natural streams. Constructed watershed projects include approximately 1,000 miles of channel enlargement or realignment on perennial natural channels. This represents only about one-eighth of the total miles of channel work, but a very important segment with respect to environmental values. We are presently



considering a prohibition against enlargement or realignment of perennial natural streams without specific approval from the Office of the Secretary.

One last comment on new directions -- the soundness of the watershed program is still dependent upon technical competency, an aggressive education program, with financial assistance channeled into the right problem areas. This will need to be underpinned with needed timely research efforts to support this important mission. I will work closely with all of you to accomplish this effort.

### Public Participation

Public participation is the key in this Administration's approach. Decision-making needs to reflect the desires of the broadest possible spectrum of our society. We will be developing policies which require the maximum feasible efforts to insure public involvement. This will require an air of cooperation in all phases of planning and implementation. I know that it is not easy to get participation from everyone, but we will work hard at getting as many as possible to participate as partners in this effort.

This approach will help us to serve the public -- that is what the small watershed program is all about. When we stop serving the public -- the program is doomed to failure.

### Watershed Planning and Evaluation

The Special Study Committee recommended that the evaluation process be shifted away from the strict economic development evaluations which are summarized in an elementary benefit/cost ratio. They recommended more consideration be given to "quality of life." I fully support this approach.



I am concerned that the principles and standards are oriented too much toward narrow economic evaluations without sufficient recognition to the evaluation of the quality of our resources. I plan to work closely with the Department of the Interior and others in government to make this evaluation process more sophisticated. The Water Resources Council has been directed to take a look at ways to revise the principles and standards which allow environmental values to be equally measured and used in decision-making. We will fully support such a review.

We are implementing a new effort in the safety field which will be of interest to many of you. The President has asked all of the major departments to make a review of their design criteria to determine the adequacy of the safety precautions being practiced. I have set up an interagency task force to lead this dam-safety review effort with assistance from outside consultants. We are determined to make this an objective review. The Department of Agriculture is involved in the construction of more dams than any other Federal department, ranging from small stock ponds to large watershed dams. We will use various professional organizations to assist us where they can.

The President's recent environmental message contained numerous policy directions. Many of these policy directions impact directly on watershed project evaluations. For example, the Council on Environmental Quality has been asked to prepare uniform regulations for use by all agencies in the preparation of environmental impact statements. Each agency within USDA, including the Soil Conservation Service, will have to revise their EIS guidelines to be consistent with CEQ regulations. The major purpose is to make the EIS a more useful document for decision-making, to reduce paperwork, and to highlight "real" alternatives. We will be working closely with CEQ in



implementing this Executive Order -- with my commitment to you that this will be done with minimum delay to projects.

The President also called for more emphasis on past project evaluation. I view this effort essential as we look at how well we have performed to help us do better in the future. We will need to develop improved evaluation and monitoring systems if we are to be successful in accomplishing the President's charge.

### Land Treatment and Water Quality

I was pleased to note the recommendations which deal with an increased thrust in getting the land treatment on the ground in watershed projects. I am concerned about the land treatment part of the watershed program. I am asking the Soil Conservation Service to strengthen its policy to require that a minimum land treatment program be specified and installed before Federal assistance will be made available for structural measures. We intend to put more emphasis on evaluating land treatment. I am convinced that the land treatment part of the watershed program has not been recognized for its real contribution toward improved water quality. We will be taking a hard look at this opportunity.

This concern leads me to placing heavy emphasis on rural water quality management, 208 planning (Section 208 of P.L. 92-500), and land treatment. You will notice that I mentioned rural water quality, 208 planning, and land treatment in the same context. It is done deliberately. These three items relate strongly to each other. Two of the three are "old hat" in watershed projects.



A rural water-quality "program" is emerging in the United States through the combined efforts of many organizations and under diverse authorities. There is new awareness of the importance of nonpoint source pollution control towards meeting the 1983 goals of swimmable and fishable waters. Along with this awareness, we see an emerging partnership among conservation districts, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Soil Conservation Service, and State and local water-quality agencies in meeting the 208 challenge. We believe that this partnership will become the dominant institutional strategy for effecting nonpoint pollution control in rural America.

It should be clear to all of us that water quality in rural areas is largely a function of land use and treatment. Watershed projects have been and will continue to be an important part of rural water-quality efforts. Some of the familiar conservation practices we have been using for years in watersheds are emerging now as best management practices (BMP's). However, Section 208 implementation can be the vehicle that puts it all together. We will be developing watershed plans that adequately address water quality, have adequate assessments of water resources, and provide for control of nonpoint sources in the finished plan. We are also going to take a hard look at using our River Basin planning efforts to develop needed resource data to help in the 208 continuing planning process.

Watershed projects and river basin plans are excellent vehicles to carry out and fund many of the needed practices planned under 208. We plan to work closely with EPA, State planning agencies, watershed sponsors, and others to accomplish these objectives.



In a sense, the experience we have gained in the land treatment phase of the small watershed program offers a good model of the challenges involved in implementing an extensive nonpoint source program. It is not easy. To date, we have relied primarily on volunteerism based on the soil stewardship ethic to achieve these goals. Volunteerism alone has been successful in watersheds, but not as successful as we would like. I fully support this approach, but we will need to look at other tools, such as economic incentives and disincentives, as we face up to the total nonpoint problems.

The 404 permit program administered by the Corps of Engineers has been of major concern to many agricultural groups. I am working closely with others in this administration to insure that the program is workable and does not result in lengthy delays in construction of watershed projects. This will require certain exemptions for agriculture.

All of this means we need to assure ourselves that we have maximized the use of non-structural and land treatment alternatives in watershed plans in the upland, before we conclude that dams and channels must be constructed. I hope that we can work closely together to accomplish these broad objectives.

I have just received a copy of the joint EPA-NACD publication entitled "Conservation Districts and 208 Water Quality Management." I want to commend these folks for the excellent job that has been done to put Section 208 into perspective. This effort certainly sets the stage for a close partnership between the agricultural-rural community and EPA in this very important task.

In summary, I want to touch on the tough problem of funding. I know that many of you are concerned about the recent discussion over whether or not certain water projects will be funded next year. I appreciate that uncertainty



leads to frustration. The Special Study Committee touched on achieving a balance between planning and construction. I fully support this objective and will work toward its achievement.

Implementation of these changes will result in a watershed program that will meet more of your needs. I am convinced that the merits of the watershed program will be evident, however, and that the funding support will follow. There is new public awareness of the need to protect our land and water resources, and I am convinced that many of the proposals that have been discussed at this Congress will receive priority support in the future. I recognize this will require a hard look at cost-sharing policies. I will work closely with the Soil Conservation Service, the Water Resources Council and others to accomplish needed change in this area.

I want to commend you for a job well done. But most of all, I want you to know that I am convinced that the watershed program, if it evolves in response to changing societal values and concerns, has a great future and I want to be a partner in seeing that it does so evolve. I look forward to working closely with you as we seek to implement many of the recommendations you have made.

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